

## ROBERT B. PARKER'S SOMEONE TO WATCH OVER ME

### 1

It was early evening and early summer, and my bay window was cracked open above Berkeley Street. I had a half-eaten turkey sub on my desk and the sports page from The Globe splayed out underneath. Dan Shaughnessy proclaimed Mookie Betts to be overrated. I'm sure many said the same thing about me. But I was pretty sure being overrated was better than being underrated. A mistake few made twice.

I contemplated Mookie's situation as I heard a knock on the anteroom door.

"Second door on your left," I said.

Mattie Sullivan entered my office.

"Still having trouble with the advertising firm?"

"Bad advertising to list their own address wrong."

"Freakin' morons," Mattie said.

Like me, Mattie suffered few fools. And as my occasional secretary, part-time assistant, and sleuthing apprentice, she didn't take kindly to the two-person agency that had rooms down the hall. Mattie leaned into the doorframe. She'd grown into a tall girl with long limbs, long red hair, and a heart-shaped Irish face full of freckles. When she smiled, she could light up a room. But Mattie rarely smiled and wasn't smiling now.

"You need anything else today?" she said.

"Nope."

"I paid the rent, deposited the checks, and talked to the painters about next week."

"What happens next week?"

"They paint," Mattie said. "This place hadn't had a touch-up since 1982."

"What do you know about 1982?"

"That's the year my mother was born."

"Ouch."

"Yeah," Mattie said. "Truth hurts, big guy."

Mattie hung in the doorway, green eyes lingering on me as I turned the page of the newspaper. I still bought a physical copy at the newsstand around the corner. I was old-fashioned that way. In fact, Susan reminded me I was old-fashioned in most ways, from my music to my movie choices. But who doesn't enjoy a little Django Reinhardt before their Thin Man triple feature?

"Something on your mind?" I said.

"I don't know."

I looked up from where I'd spread out the newspaper and reached for my coffee mug. Taking a sip, I realized it had grown cold. Mattie, having noted my expression, walked forward, plucked the mug from my hand, and dumped out the cold contents into the sink. She refilled the mug from the Mr. Coffee atop my file cabinet, slid it before me, and took a seat in one of my clients' chairs.

"Sugar?"

"Nope."

"So there's this girl."

"Okay."

"She's a friend, but not a great friend," she said. "Just the younger sister of a girl I know. She was a Gatey girl, too."

"Gatey girl?"

"Gates of Heaven church in Southie," Mattie said. "Christ. Keep up, Spenser."

I nodded and took a sip of coffee. Mattie demanded a keen mind and reflexes firing on all cylinders.

"So this girl, her name is Chloe Turner by the way, not that it matters to the story, but there you are," Mattie said, leaning forward from the chair. "Chloe comes to me because of the stuff I used to do in the neighborhood. You know, running favors for friends. Asking questions to the right people. Finding shit."

"Sleuthing."

"I call it finding shit out," Mattie said. "But sure. Sleuthing. Chloe wanted me to sleuth for her."

"And what does she wish you to sleuth?"

"Chloe lost her backpack and her laptop at some fancy- schmancy club off the Common," she said. "And she wants it back."

"Sounds simple," I said. "Why does she need to enlist your services?"

"Because they wouldn't let her back in," Mattie said. "They threatened to call the cops if she didn't leave. And Chloe had everything on that laptop, not to mention some personal shit in the bag."

"Personal shit is hard to come by."

"And so I went to the club and got the whole 'fuck off' thing from some guy working the door," Mattie said. "Not only did they say they'd never heard of Chloe Turner, they told me that if I, or anyone connected to her, came back, they'd call the cops. How do you like that?"

"Not at all," I said. "What club?"

"Place called the Blackstone Club," Mattie said. "Down toward Chinatown in some crummy brick building. No sign. Just a big door and a buzzer. What kind of freakin' club doesn't have a sign?"

"One that wishes to be elite and confidential," I said, starting to stand. "Shall we?"

"Sit down, Spenser," Mattie said. "You know the rules. When you need help, you ask. When I need help, I ask."

"So what do you need?"

"Advice."

"I am an open book of knowledge."

Mattie nodded. I nodded. I took a sip of coffee. It tasted much better hot, but I still missed the cream and sugar. Small steps.

"Here's what happened," Mattie said. "Chloe doesn't want to cause any trouble and, more than anything, doesn't want to go to the cops. Her mother would go bullshit if she knew what Chloe'd been up to."

I leaned back from the desk. Outside, down on the street, I could hear the whine of an industrial drill and planks of wood tossed against the pavement. A car without a muffler passed and headed out of earshot. A symphony of the Back Bay.

"Chloe knows a girl who knows a girl who promised her an easy five hundred bucks."

"To meet a man at the club?"

"And give him a massage," Mattie said. "Chloe says she was promised that was all there was to it."

"Had she ever met him?"

"Nope."

"Did she have any expertise as a massage therapist?"

"Christ, no," Mattie said. "She's just a kid."

"How old?"

Mattie tossed her head to the side and leveled her eyes at me. "Fifteen."

I felt the hair raise up my neck. My stomach turned a bit.

"I know," Mattie said. "But part of what I promise is confidentiality."

"This sounds like a felony."

"Hold on," Mattie said. "Only gets worse."

I listened.

"Chloe says when she first got there, a woman met her at the club and gave her an envelope stuffed with cash," Mattie said. "The woman told her the guy was some big-time executive hotshot. She didn't need to speak unless spoken to, had to wear this special outfit, pay attention to his feet."

"His feet."

"All creeps are into feet," Mattie said. "Anyway, she goes in there, the room all dim with scented candles and all that. And there's the man, laying on his back with a sheet covering the lower half of his body. Chloe says she was so nervous her hands were shaking. She starts to rub the man's feet like she'd been told. The man makes some small talk with her. What's your name? What music do you like? Do you have a boyfriend? All that kind of stuff. She said he was nice. And not bad-looking for an old dude. She said he was polite until things got weird."

"Massaging a grown man's feet is the definition of weird."

"Chloe said she thought the whole thing was legit until at one point the man raised up, threw off the sheet, and started going to town on himself."

I felt my face flush. I wasn't comfortable talking about such matters with Mattie. I remembered when she was fourteen, coming to see me with a collection of crumpled bills in the hope of finding her mother's killer. She was tough as old boots but would always be a lost little girl to me.

"Chloe said she just froze up," Mattie said. "She couldn't scream. She couldn't talk. She couldn't move. She just stood there as the man got finished with his business."

"Ick," I said.

"Yep," Mattie said. "That's when she bolted from the room and the club and left her clothes, her laptop inside that backpack. She doesn't want any trouble. She doesn't want to see that man again. All she wants is her stuff."

"Okay," I said. "Let me help."

"Advice," Mattie said. "I only want advice."

"I'd much rather assist."

"Maybe I shouldn't have told you."

"You made the right move."

"You want to beat the hell out of this guy," she said. "Don't you?"

"Chloe should file a complaint with the police."

"She can't."

"Why?"

"Because she took the money," Mattie said. "Don't you see?"

"That doesn't make what happened right."

"What would you do?"

I leaned back in my office chair and kicked my Nikes up onto the side of the desk. I began to mentally run through the collection of creeps I've known over the years. My go-to action would have been physical or public humiliation. Perhaps tacking his manhood to the tallest tree in the Common.

"Does Chloe know this man's name?"

"No."

"Does she know anything about him?"

"Nothing," she said. "I already asked."

"If it were me, I'd go back to this club and tell them they can either turn over the backpack or else you'll tell your story on Channel 7. Say you have Hank Phillip Ryan on speed dial."

"But I don't."

"But I do," I said.

"And she'd show up with cameras?"

"In a heartbeat."

"Okay," Mattie said.

"I want you to have Chloe talk to someone in sex crimes," I said. "I'll call Quirk and arrange it."

"She won't," Mattie said. "But I'll try."

Mattie let herself out, the anteroom door closing with a light click. I reached for my coffee and turned to stare out the window. I spent a lot of time staring out windows.

Perhaps if I stared long enough, a sign would appear somewhere in the clouds. I peered into the sky, but there were no clouds today. So many creeps. So little time.

I turned back to my desk. Besides the sub and the newspaper, it was bare. I hadn't had a decent case since returning from Los Angeles earlier that year. Maybe it might be time for me to dig into my 401k, if only I had a 401k.

I picked up the phone and dialed Quirk.

"That sounds like one sick fuck," Quirk said.

"Kid's fifteen."

"Jesus Christ," Quirk said. "I got two granddaughters that age. What's the vic's name again?"

"I'll need to clear it with Mattie."

"Mattie Sullivan?" Quirk said. "She's a kid, too."

"Not anymore," I said. "She's twenty-two."

"She still wants to be like you?"

"Yep."

"God help her."

## 2

"That's sexual battery," Susan said.

"Along with a multitude of other charges."

"Did he touch her?"

"Mattie says he didn't," I said.

"But he exposed himself?"

"Yes," I said. "Seeking solo gratification."

"Ick," Susan said.

"My sentiments exactly."

Inside my Navy Yard apartment, I continued to spoon the calamari salad I'd just picked up from Red's onto an antique china plate. A collection of scallops as large as fists waited nearby in a mix of white wine and lemon juice. I'd premade a mixed green salad with fresh tomatoes and local peppers from the Public Market. A bottle of sauvignon blanc had been opened and sat chilled in an ice bucket for Susan. I nursed a Johnnie Walker Blue in a tall glass with lots of ice.

"But Mattie doesn't want her friend Chloe to talk to the cops?"

"Mattie agrees she should talk to the cops," I said. "First the laptop. And then the creep."

"And one does not change Mattie Sullivan's mind."

"One does not," I said. "Would you like more wine?"

"I've barely started this glass."

Outside the floor-to-ceiling plate-glass window, the sun painted the shipyard, the Zakim Bridge, and downtown Boston in a lovely gold glow. The ship masts ticktocked in a slight summer wind. I refilled my glass with more ice and more Johnnie Walker. Ellington at Newport spun on the turntable.

As I shifted to a second plate, I dropped some squid onto the hardwood floor. A gangly creature with tall legs and droopy brown ears rushed into the kitchen to assist with the mess. The creature lapped up the squid and turned its brown eyes up to me for more, head tilted in a cheap ploy for sympathy.

I tossed down a bit more.

"You're training her to know you're a sucker," Susan said.

"Pearl has always known my weakness."

"And you still believe this Pearl and our Pearl are one and the same?"

I nodded, pouring out some olive oil into a hot copper skillet.

"Makes as much sense as anything," Susan said.



"True."

"And this system of yours, knowing when she'll be born and where to find her, is secret."

"Known only to me and Hawk."

"And what does Hawk think?"

"Hawk believes all white people are crazy."

"Hawk may have a point."

Puppy Pearl scampered away, only to return a moment later with a rope toy larger than she is, and dropped it at Susan's feet. Susan picked it up and tossed it across my apartment. The apartment was four times the size of my old place on Marlborough, and it took some time for Puppy Pearl to return. Old Pearl had passed away back in March, and the weeks after had in many ways been unbearable. Losing Pearl Two had been even tougher than losing the first.

"How about I just call her Puppy for now?" Susan said.

"Not ready for her to assume the throne yet?"

"Not yet," she said. "Give me time."

I sipped my scotch. Duke debated a tulip, a turnip, rosebud, rhubarb, filet, or plain beef stew. The warm light across the hardwood floors and brick walls made for a pleasant early evening. I picked up the scallops and set them into a hot pan. The sizzling sound only added to the pleasantness.

"Do you know anything more about this man?"

"Mattie told me her client said he was middle-aged, handsome, and supposedly fabulously wealthy."

"No name?"

"No name."

"Did Mattie call this girl her client?"

"Not that exact word," I said. "But she believes the young woman is her client."

"Does that worry you?"

"Why would it worry me?"

"The life you lead is very interesting and very satisfying for you," Susan said. "But it doesn't come easy or without many risks and sacrifices."

"But if I hadn't been in this line of work, how else would've I met a hot Jewish shrink with incredible sexual appetites?"

"Right now, my appetites are focused on those scallops."

"But later?"

"Dessert," she said. "What do you have for dessert?"

"Where is Susan Silverman, and what have you done with her?"

Susan stared at me with a devilish little grin. I felt my heart swell in my chest and a smile creep onto my lips.

"You will help Mattie," Susan said.

"Of course."

"Even if she doesn't want help."

"Do you really have any doubts?"

I flipped the scallops, the edges turning a lovely brown color in the butter and olive oil. We were nearly ready to sit down. Pearl rambled up to my feet and looked up panting, long tongue lolling out of her little mouth as all Pearls had done before.